

Building Positive Conditions for Learning at Home



How You Can Create a Supportive Space for Learning (Part 1: Emotional Support)

Support is when you know that someone “has your back.” When children and youth feel supported, they are more confident and can take on new challenges. Providing emotional support for your child has always been important, but this support is even more critical now that your child is learning in new ways and in new settings. In this section, we will focus on:

- **Understanding what it means to create a supportive learning environment:** what it is and why it matters
- **Using this information:** strategies that can help you provide *emotional* support at home
- **Things to look for:** what is normal and what may be a potential warning sign that something needs more attention
- **Resources:** materials you can consult to explore this topic in greater detail

As you read through [these resources](#), remember: Every family is different. Everyone’s individual circumstances are different. Everyone brings their unique set of strengths to address life’s challenges. The information we are sharing here is designed to be flexible and adapted in the ways that work best for you.

ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

The support you provide to your child can take multiple forms, including:

- **Emotional support:** “This problem seems to be frustrating you, but I know that you can do this – let’s do it together this time.”
- **Learning support:** “You seem to be having trouble with that math problem, let’s figure out how to do it,” or “Click this button to submit your assignment to your teacher.”

This piece covers emotional support. A companion piece covers learning support. By using both parts together, you can create a supportive environment for learning at home.

Understanding Supportive Environments for Learning

Children learn best when they feel (and are) safe and supported. This means providing them with the emotional support they need to stay focused and engaged, even when they face challenges. Emotional support includes encouragement, help, and motivation.

All children are different and their needs for support will vary. Some children will enjoy independent work, whereas other children may need more guidance. Some children who have experienced previous anxiety about school (be it social or academic) might do better in this new learning environment; however, other children may feel more anxious about learning in a new setting. Some require support for learning disabilities. **You know your child best.** Use what you know about your child's strengths, interests, and experiences, as well as your family culture and context, to help them learn.

Using This Information

The following strategies will help you create a supportive space for learning at home that meets your child's academic, social, and emotional needs. To provide *emotional support*:

- **Make sure that YOU are ready and that the learning space is safe.** The sections on [readiness](#) and [safety](#) provide helpful strategies you can use right away. Remember: building positive conditions for learning is like building a house. You need a solid foundation (your readiness to support your child) and structure (safety) before you can begin to stand up the walls (in this case, support).
- **Maintain or adapt routines.** Where possible they should be just like the ones your family had before COVID-19, if they were good routines. Our brains work better when things are predictable. During the school week, make sure your child gets up around the same time and have them get dressed as if they were still going to school. Make sure they go to sleep around the same time each night. It is OK if your at-home school day does not last for the typical time. In fact, you will likely need to adjust the hours due to work schedules and other things going on in your home but you *can* designate a daily time for academic work that makes sense in your household. If this schedule cannot be the same each day,

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LEARNING SUPPORT AND EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

To understand the two types of support we describe in this section—learning support and emotional support—it may be helpful to think about teaching someone to ride a bike.

The first part is making sure whoever you're teaching understands the mechanics: where to put their hands on the handlebars, how to gain momentum, when to bring their feet to the pedals. This is *learning support*.

The other part is being there to catch someone if they fall, and offering words of encouragement to help them try again. That is *emotional support*.

Both kinds of support—understanding how to ride a bike while also feeling that encouragement and motivation to keep trying—are necessary.

ensure your child knows what to expect each day, for instance by posting the daily schedule in a designated space. If you can, work with your child to set the schedule together so they can have ownership over their day.

- **Set behavioral guidelines/expectations among all family members at home.** Families may be quarantined in the same space for hours at a time, and discussing up front how to resolve conflicts can help ease tensions and mitigate conflict. Try to co-create a set of shared norms and expectations for the home that includes commitments (for example, one person talks at a time, use your best voice, give think time) and consequences (what happens when we don't honor the commitments we have made to each other?). Family norms work best when everyone follows them, adults and children alike. Reinforcement is key here.
- **Ensure work periods last a developmentally appropriate length of time.** Children will vary in their ability to pay attention based on several factors like their interest in the topic, level of frustration, other distractions, and developmental age. To understand how long you can expect your child to pay attention, it may be helpful to use the rule of 2-and-5: multiply your child's age by 2 and by 5, and this will give you a rough range for how long they *should* be able to sustain their attention. For example, a child who is 7 years old will likely be able to sustain their attention for 14-35 minutes. A 13-year-old should be able to sustain their attention for longer, roughly 26-65 minutes. This is only an estimate, and you should make sure to consider other factors as you set work periods.
- **Look for signs or cues that your child is feeling bored, frustrated, or is having trouble learning.** Just as children are used to moving from one class to another or having free time during recess, it is important that you build in breaks as needed (this might be more frequently for some children). For young children, this could include some type of physical activity (take a bike ride or go for a walk) or maybe they need time to rest without being in front of a screen. For older children, you can create time for them to socialize with their friends via social media (you might need to work with friend's parents to coordinate schedules). All children may benefit from online yoga classes or mindfulness activities (many of which are free of charge).
- **Look for signs or cues that your child is really enjoying and is engaged with an activity.** While there may be activities that your child finds frustrating or boring, you might also find that there are certain types of activities that they really enjoy. Make note of these activities and use them as a source of motivation during the day. Or, build them into your child's schedule strategically to improve their learning experience.
- **Check in with your child often** to see how they are doing and feeling. Ask them how they feel about the daily schedule, their lessons, and their feelings in general. Consider what works for your child during challenging times and apply these strategies while they are learning at home. The [section on creating a safe environment](#) for learning at home offers other strategies for connecting with your child about how they are feeling and what they are thinking.

- **Talk to other friends and families.** Learn more about how they are supporting their children during this time and share strategies of your own. If you have access to technology, consider setting up a virtual lunch or snack time with your child’s friends to help them stay connected.
- **For children with learning disabilities,** there are additional and specific strategies that may help them learn during this time.
 - Focus on your child’s effort, rather than if they were able to determine the “right answer.” Offer specific praise that acknowledges their hard work and persistence.
 - Remind yourself and your child that each day is a new day and each task is a new task.
 - Create daily schedules to support time management (add pictures if your child is unable to read).
 - Set timers. Some children need a “countdown” so they can see how much time is left on a task. This will also help you to ensure work periods are an appropriate length of time.
 - Post pictures to use as reminders. For example, if you are also trying to work from home and need periods of quiet, you might find a picture of a person with their finger on their lips to represent when you need them to speak quietly.
 - Create hand signals for your child to use to let you know that they need to take a break.

Things to Look For

While some children are better able to communicate when they need support, others might show you they need support through their actions. Pay attention to the verbal and nonverbal cues that your child may need additional support.

Preschoolers may act out, throw tantrums, whine more than usual, or have difficulty transitioning to new activities. They may refuse to engage in any learning activities, even ones they had enjoyed previously.

Elementary school children may express self-defeating statements such as “I can’t do it,” or “It does not matter how hard I try.” You may also observe defiant behavior or your child refusing to engage in learning activities or complete their assignments.

Adolescents’ need for support may show up as disengagement, frustration, anger, stress, or anxiety. You may hear, for example, more frequent questions or concerns about grades, returning to the normal daily schedule, connecting with peers, or transitioning into a new grade or school next year. Your child may also seem less engaged in their learning or in completing their assignments.

Resources

Remember, children take their cues from adults, so it is equally important to take care of yourself and know your limits. Look for signs that you may be feeling frustrated, overwhelmed, upset, or exhausted. When these feelings emerge, you may find it difficult to give your child the support that they need. The [section on readiness](#) has more information you can use to make sure you are taking care of yourself so that you can be there for your child. In addition, these resources will help you to create a supportive space for learning at home:

- [Coronavirus Resources from Turnaround for Children](#): Strategies and tools that will help you learn more about the role of emotional safety and support for learning.
- [COVID-19 Response: Resources for Educators and Families](#): The Committee for Children, developers of Second Step, is offering free resources, lessons, trainings, and webinars for parents, families, and teachers.
- [Supporting Families with PBIS at Home](#): Recommendations for families and caregivers on how to use PBIS to continue to support their students' social and emotional growth and minimize behavioral disruptions in the home.
- [Supporting Teenagers and Young Adults During the Coronavirus Crisis](#): Developed by the Child Mind Institute, Inc., offers tips for parents and caregivers with older children—teenagers and young adults home from college—at home.
- [Learning Together at Home](#): Developed by Colorin Colorado, this resource has ideas for activities that you can do around the house, outside, and in your neighborhood.